

# Drawing parts together

## The philosophy of education of Nel Noddings

*Lynda Stone*

This essay honors the career and writings of American philosopher of Education, Nel Noddings on her first visit to Sweden in Spring 2006. The title is taken from a recent interview in which she discussed connections between her biography and scholarly contributions. The interview augments analysis of major texts from Noddings out of which the essay's author posits her 'philosophy of education.' Following an introduction and biographical situating, sections focus on education and schools, care theory and teaching, and approaches and thematics within her philosophical writings. The essay closes with recognition of Noddings's international significance in both philosophy and education.

Keywords: care theory, teaching, philosophy of education.

Education ... [is] a mode of living and learning together ... a way of being in the world.<sup>1</sup>

American philosopher of education, Nel Noddings highlights a turning point in her life as the moment when she decided to “draw both parts together”, specifically the personal and philosophical, in a focus on caring as academic cornerstone.<sup>2</sup> From the late seventies, this preoccupation with ethics, always tied to education, has resulted in

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international renown. Today Noddings is Professor Emerita and still greatly active as author, speaker and advisor.

The essay celebrates Noddings's first visit to Sweden by presenting her life and work for a Scandinavian audience. In the incident above, the parts drawn together are aspects of her life as student and teacher, wife and mother as they influence what she desires to write as a philosopher of education. In what follows, this personal background is utilized to interpret her "philosophy of education". This statement seeks to honor Noddings, to present a partial vision of her work; it is not critical in the philosophical sense. Instead it is an interpretation penned by a former student and continuing friend. To date, she has not specifically written such a "philosophy" even as she authored a book entitled *Philosophy of Education* (1995), itself a broad introduction to the disciplinary field in which her own writings are situated.

One place possibly to begin this exposition is with a general "definition". While it is apparent that Noddings has developed and does utilize a meaning of education, for her there is no "ism" that encapsulates what she believes about philosophy and/or education, no "Noddingsism" that results from many years of systematic attention to a life domain. Neither is she to be identified with a single philosophical label, a tradition. Even as this is asserted, she does acknowledge roots in pragmatism and existentialism. An appropriate assessment overall is that as an educator and a significant philosopher in her own right, what she has come to believe and write is singularly and identifiably her own.

The essay demonstrates how parts of Noddings's life have been drawn together to produce a very significant corpus of work. Out of this, what is posited is a general "philosophy of education". This is appropriate because education is always central to what she writes as a philosopher. In the following, here are sections and foci:

(1) Biography that situates her life and career within its education context; (2) Education and schools that connects biographic and philosophical elements to each of these central domains; (3) Care theory and teaching that continues education connection through her principal philosophical contribution; (4) Philosophy that highlights her approach to writing as well as emphasizes a couple of thematics that appear in her scholarship; and (5) Significance as conclusion to the essay.

## Biography

Now in her seventies, Nel Noddings has spent her life in education and educating – as student, teacher, mother, professor, scholar. This section overviews formal aspects of her education biography. As a girl, she

attended public primary and secondary schools, the base for a lifelong interest. Undergraduate and graduate education consisted of the following: a bachelors degree in mathematics and physical science, a masters in mathematics, and a doctorate in education with an emphasis in educational philosophy and theory attending respectively in the US Montclair State College and Rutgers University in New Jersey and Stanford University in California. Her adult working life began in 1949 as a teacher in what is now middle school and then in high school. She worked in public schools across nearly twenty years, serving not only as teacher but also as department chair, assistant principal, curriculum supervisor, and university instructor. Following completion of her Ph.D. study in 1973, she held faculty positions at Pennsylvania State University and the University of Chicago before joining Stanford University in the late 1970s. At Stanford key career points include earning tenure and promotion to Professor in 1986, being appointed Lee L. Jacks Professor of Child Education in 1992, and becoming Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Acting Dean in 1990 and 1992, each for two years. There she moved to Professor Emerita status in 1998 and since that time has additionally affiliated with Teachers College, Columbia University, Colgate University, University of Southern Maine, and Eastern Michigan University, the last three in named positions.

As scholar and professor, Noddings is inordinately accomplished, a senior leader in education worldwide. To date she has authored 15 books, among them her scholarly bookend works on the ethics of care, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* in 1984 and 2003 and *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* in 2002. For the focus of this essay especially relevant also are *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 1992 and 2005, *Philosophy of Education*, 1995 and forthcoming 2006, and *Happiness and Education*, 2003. A new book, *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach*, is to be published in 2006. Various works have been translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Turkish.

In addition, Noddings has penned over 130 journal articles, forwards and reviews and over 70 book chapters, encyclopedia entries, and conference proceedings. Journals in which her work has appeared include *Educational Theory*, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *Theory into Practice*, *Teachers College Record*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Educational Researcher*, *Review of Educational Research*, *Journal of Research in Mathematics Education*, *Hypatia*, and *Journal of Social Philosophy*. Beginning in 1975 and continuing to the present, she has delivered keynotes, addresses, papers, and talks almost too numerous to count in the USA and Canada before school, college and university, professional and public groups. Internationally she has spo-

ken in Argentina, Germany, Israel, Japan, Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and now in Sweden.

Finally Noddings has held significant elective office, as member and President of the National Academy of Education and as President of the Philosophy of Education Society and the John Dewey Society. She has reviewed for and served on editorial boards of over 30 journals. She has received many awards for outstanding scholarship and professional service including several honorary degrees. Examples of the former include the Distinguished Educator Award from the Association of Teacher Educators and the Lifetime Achievement Award from Division B, Curriculum, of the American Educational Research Association.

A comment about the character of her scholarship also is pertinent, a topic returned to subsequently. Noddings is one of a few “crossover philosophers” of education, well-recognized beyond professional education. She is read and respected because of the sophistication of her thoughts and, as well, the cogency and everyday concreteness of her views. Her writing has a recognizable style. It is crisp and clear even as she explicates complex thoughts; it is sprinkled with anecdotes and illustrations, in part from a personal approach with which readers identify. She is herself extremely well and widely read, pulling from many sources in her writing but especially from various philosophical traditions and authors and from literature. In addition to these general features, a value premise underpins her philosophic pursuits, tied to how she believes life ought to be lived. In writing this means positing moderation itself, presenting “both sides” and alternatives to viewpoints, and always – always – asking questions of readers and of herself. Another aspect of her writing is its own evolution: across texts, key ideas and concepts are introduced, reappear and are modified or added to. Thus a significant conceptual base is prominent in her writings. A summing stance exemplifies in general the character of her scholarship: this is that even as her views are strong, Noddings neither offers nor calls for certainty in dealing with both philosophical and educational matters. She knows that such a stance, a search, does not work and indeed might well be dangerous or harmful. At base, then, an ethical preoccupation is a key premise for all aspects of her life and work. By the way, Noddings does offer specific educational recommendations as seen in the next sections.

## Education and schools

As a philosopher of education, Noddings always ties theory to practice. She says,

if you are beginning with the ... the relations of kids to kids and kids to teachers and both to subject matter, then the fundamental nature of that relationship is the primary guide of what you're going to do ... [both philosophically and pedagogically].<sup>3</sup>

Across her writings, she deals with specifics that arise in a particular place and educational time. Roots of this approach are illustrated in thoughts on her own upbringing. She grew up in a working class family on what is known as “the Jersey shore”, on the mid-Atlantic, east coast of the United States. In the thirties as a child, she lived in small town America; she resides similarly today. In her recent book, *Starting at Home*, she writes about the importance of place, illustrating the connection to identity:

Consider a place that is both a residing place for some and a temporary residence ... [for others,] a vacation community. Little is orchestrated in such a place and yet players fill typical roles year after year ... Every time of day has its well-cast scenes. Sunrise discloses joggers, fishermen, people practicing yoga ... surfers testing the currents, and people in cars who stop for a few minutes by the shore to settle their souls before going to work ... In countless different ways, the place shapes us (Noddings 2002, pp. 151–152).

Within the context of such a shore community, some decades ago Noddings attended what she names as a “progressive public primary school”. This place fostered her many personal interests, greatly influencing an early desire to become a teacher and writer. From the second grade on, she wanted to be a teacher. Lifetime loves of history and literature were initiated in that school just as lifelong loves of gardening, canning and cooking were germinated in fertile coastal soil. These experiences contributed to her general conception of education and to specific views about schools.

## Education

As indicated at the outset, Noddings does not pose a specific philosophy of education; however she does operate from various meanings. Related to the epigraph of this essay in which education as a way of life is suggested, perhaps the most synthetic attention to the concept is this statement:

Education may be thought of as a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding, and appreciation (p. 283).

“Promotion of growth” turns attention to aims of education in her texts. First, several general points about her treatment of education. In many places where she writes about education, it is meant as synonymous with schooling. Likewise when she does specify education, she often refers directly to its aims. Writing of aims, moreover, accomplishes several philosophic purposes, to bring out her disciplinary roots, to be critical of general or specific viewpoints of others, and to suggest her own questions about or content of aims.

From strong academic training in the field of philosophy of education, Noddings is well aware that discussion of aims has been central ever since the time of the Greeks. In *Happiness* (2003), she invokes Plato, Rousseau and Dewey to compare and contrast to her own aim of happiness in schooling. Earlier, in *Philosophy* (1995), she names aims as central to Dewey’s own philosophy of education and in several places discusses his concept of “growth”. In the text last cited, she assesses Dewey’s view from the standpoint of British analytical philosopher of education, Richard S Peters.

In general Noddings concurs with many elements of Dewey’s broad philosophy of education even as she also agrees with critics that his concept of “growth” is somewhat ambiguous. First, education is doubly individual and social and means and ends. Second within education – as society, as life – people are always ends in themselves, never just means. Third, education has no fixed aim or grand intention but it does imply – perhaps direction is the best word here. Finally because of “direction”, it embodies a special emphasis on the relationship of the present to the future. Through Dewey, Noddings connects to consideration of democracy. She emphasizes his own definition and says:

When ... Dewey talks about democracy ... there’s a number of interactions and the quality of interactions among groups ... [That idea] is enormously powerful.

From Dewey also, Noddings points to additional ideas about growth and aims. In *Starting at Home* (2002), she writes:

We cannot expect ... that Dewey will tell us exactly how to recognize growth when we see it. We have to work this out for ourselves, and we will make mistakes ... We clearly have to set limits and recognize preferences. Dewey shows us how

some choices ... cannot be counted as growth. Someone who gains greater skill as a burglar ... [in the famous example] cannot be said to be growing ... Most of us have little difficulty in deciding that we do not want our children to become criminals ... but will we accept our child's choice to be a carpenter or beautician (p. 183)?

Moving to her own position, in *Happiness* (2003), she actively reinvents aims within a call for “aims-talk” in today’s schools, distinguishing it from narrow discussion of instructional goals and objectives and potentially freeing it from the present standards movement. Such talk can in her words “ask deeper questions ... uncover new problems and new possibilities” (p. 89). It surely can move schooling away from narrow preoccupation with “keeping the US strong economically”, and providing “every child opportunity to do well financially” (see p. 84). She wants much more:

[Without aims-talk] a narrow educational focus is encouraged, and we distract ourselves from the social problems that cannot be solved by schools ... [Indeed] one function of aims-talk is to challenge the existing rules by which a society has organized itself (p. 85).

To sum, it might be put that without new consideration of aims little change is potentially accomplished in education and little change results in society.

## Schools

When Noddings turns to schools, first of all she contextualizes analysis and recommendations. Her general position is worth quoting at length:

The traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. We live in an age troubled by social problems that force us to reconsider what we do in schools. At a time when thinkers in many fields are moving toward postmodernism – a rejection of one objective method, distinctively individual subjectivity, universalizability in ethics, and universal criteria for epistemology – too many educators are still wedded to the modernist view of progress and its outmoded tools (Noddings 2005, p. 173).

In *Challenge to Care*, the text from which the quote comes, she begins by describing “social changes since World War II and the schools piecemeal response” (see also Noddings 2002, beginning p. 93).

Schools, she elaborates, have assumed and then demanded that more academic training of the young will solve problems of poverty, crime and the like. For her such claims are false and dangerous as such problems are, first, principally social not merely educational, and second, unduly controlling and individually misleading. More and “higher” academic achievement has not and, given the present society, cannot guarantee everyone personal fulfillment and happy lives. Indeed such schools have resulted in lack of happiness for many. But while students complain that teachers do not care; in fact, she writes,

most teachers work very hard to express deep concern for their students ... but they are unable to make the connections that would complete caring relations (Noddings 2005, p. 2).

Happiness, as indicated above, is itself the topic of a recent text, serving here as a general exemplar of her approach to reforming schools. Biographically, she talks about two schools and experiences central to her own life in which she was very happy. One, referred to above, is her own elementary school of the late thirties, early forties, in the Deweyan progressive era prior to preparing for war. Imagine she says

a school ... where we put on plays every year and a district art supervisor would come in and look at all the stuff you had done, the hieroglyphics you had done.

The other is her first school as a teacher, in which for three years she participated in an experimental program with the same students in a self-contained classroom across grades six, seven, and eight. She still is in contact with these students today. Here is a bit of detail: trained as a secondary math teacher but armed with an emergency credential, she tells of having the opportunity “to revisit the childhood literature that I loved and to teach Greece, Rome, and Egypt”. Not only was the curriculum organization different from other programs and other teacher offerings, but so were her lessons. The setting: twenty children, a small school library as a temporary classroom. She offers,

Typically if we were talking about Egypt ... or I was reading them a story, if they wanted to speak, they spoke ... There was no hand raising or anything like that. And I suppose that was very different ... But I took to it naturally, that kind of operating.

Teacher and students alike, she infers, were happy.



Such experience, as well as parenting a large heterogeneous family, has contributed to her awareness of the centrality of happiness. Much school and university experience has also convinced her of this missing aim. In *Happiness* (2003), analysis results in recommendations for happy classrooms. Returned to in a bit more detail shortly, basic is the meeting of the physical and psychological needs of all children, needs that not only are indirectly inferred for children by caring adults but also directly expressed by them. Two examples suffice. One is provision of nourishing food for all with child–adult conversation as accompaniment. Two is attention to play such as board games. Overall she writes,

The atmosphere of classrooms should reflect the universal desire for happiness. There should be a minimum of pain (and none deliberately inflicted) ... [and] many opportunities for pleasure (p. 246).

For happiness to thrive, there must be emphasis on present experience and use of coercion only if relations of care and trust are maintained. Interestingly, elsewhere in updating *Challenge* from 1992, Noddings asserts that one single school model should not be implemented, that happiness can be found in progressive as well as traditional schools (although her personal preference is for the former). The most salient element is availability and opportunity for choice of appropriate school form by parents, children and teachers alike.

## Care theory and teaching

The cornerstone of Noddings's philosophy and philosophy of education has been her contribution to the ethics of care; these writings have made her internationally known across many professional fields. In the interview, she describes presenting the first paper on caring, in 1978 or 1979 before the California Association of Philosophy of Education, CAPE. CAPE is an intimate group of professors and their students who still meet twice yearly to give papers and offer criticism. She says,

I thought ... I'm really taking my chances here and I was a relative newcomer ... not only was it well-received ... but I got so many letters and messages afterwards ... and that's when I started writing books.

Now 15 books later, writing on caring and teaching has appeared in almost every one.

For Noddings, caring is fundamental to human life. To begin, “relation”, she asserts, is

ontologically basic ... [to caring] and the caring relation ... [is] ethically basic ... ‘Relation’ may be thought of as a set of ordered pairs generated by some rule that describes the affect – or subjective experience – of the members (Noddings 1984, pp. 3–4).

Already within the field that has come to be known as “care theory”, there is something new: caring is relation, not principle nor form of ethical deliberation nor virtue in the sense of a list of personal qualities. Relation is “enacted” in the interaction of two people. In the language that Noddings establishes in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, published in 1984, the one-caring is receptive to the other, the cared-for, and exhibits engrossment and motivational displacement in the interaction. In the ideal, “she” is present, and “sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts” (p. 19). She attends to his needs and his projects. “He” in return is responsive, “glows, grows stronger, and feels not so much that he has been given something as that something has been added to him” (p. 20).<sup>4</sup> Often-intangible, these feelings are the caring relation, then enlarged into plans and actions for and by the cared-for.

The caring feeling – attitude or disposition too – in philosophical terms is both natural and ethical. Such feelings arise in circles and chains of daily life, between person-pairs ranging from intimate others to strangers. Importantly the one-caring answers with an “I must” the needs of anyone whom she meets. She acts from and supports an ethical ideal, the vision of her best self that she carries with her. The difference between natural and ethical caring concerns the kind of obligation; caring is sometimes what one wants to do and sometimes what one has to do. Sometimes too caring becomes burdensome and the one-caring cannot either engage nor sustain the feeling and its responsibilities. Then one is “ethically diminished”. Noddings writes,

My ideal must forever carry with it not only what I would be but what I am and have been. There is no unbridgeable chasm between what I am and what I would be. I build the bridge to my future self (pp. 101–102).

Finally caring relations have various temporal frames, short-lived and long-standing, enduring or interrupted. Significantly ones-caring are always open to new or renewed interactions (and one hopes too that cared-fors remain receptive). As Noddings puts it,

Caring preserves both the group and the individual ... [and] it limits our obligation so that it may realistically be met (p. 100).

Several features of caring require further comment. On the one hand, caring is a tough ethic since one cannot easily resort to a rule to resolve a difficult situation. It sometimes entails guilt as one is ethically diminished. It sometimes involves denial, misunderstanding or even scorn since others may not understand and be able to accept caring. On the other hand, however, caring also entails courage and joy as the projects of the other are carried forth, as both persons are supported and sustained in the feeling situation. Moreover, for Noddings groups are composed of ordered pairs and indeed community, society, the world develops out of them.

Before turning to teaching, it is important to note the philosophical uniqueness of Noddings's care theory. This is taken up in the final section of the essay, but already mentioned are "new" concepts such as engrossment, motivational displacement, and ethical diminishment. These and other central ideas are present in *Caring* and continue to appear across texts. One example of an idea introduced early on but returned to and developed is "encounter". Initially it incorporates the special features of interaction of the relational pairs, especially proximity, uniqueness and genuine feeling. Taking lead from Martin Buber, she asserts that at a moment of encounter, the cared-for momentarily "fills the firmament" of the one-caring (Noddings 1984, p. 176).<sup>5</sup> This feeling is especially important for teaching encounters, Noddings posits.

Initial discussion of encounter is greatly expanded in *Starting at Home*. Here Noddings acknowledges that ones caring cannot care for everyone. She writes,

To suppose that we can or that we ought to is a lovely but wild dream. The best we can do is to care directly for those who address us – those we actually encounter (notice that this includes strangers) and indirectly for others working to establish social conditions in which care can flourish (Noddings 2002, p. 48).

In each case some enter into relation while others do not; some welcome obligation while others reject it. She puts it thusly:

[Ideally we] accept responsibility for the Other and are accountable to the Other, not to a set of *a priori* rules. 'Absolutely present, in his face, the Other – without any metaphor – faces me.' In encounter, obligation happens. But one needs practice in responding with care to what arises in encounters (p. 50, here citing Emmanuel Levinas).

Practice in today's society might well be most necessary when strangers in need are in proximity. In discussing possible encounters, Noddings relates a true story complicated by elements of "legal obligation". Operators of a boat rental service watched from the shore as a customer drowned in an outing on a national holiday. The court ruled that they had no obligation to heed the drowning man's cries for help. She explains that unlike Europe, in the US there is no legal obligation to assist a stranger or as a stranger to aid another. The only exceptions to the principle of "no duty to rescue" involve those who have prior legal responsibility – those for whom natural rather than ethical caring generally operates. Disagreeing strongly with the law, she claims this:

Normal people who have been well cared for themselves will respond to those who cry out for care ... [Indeed] something is wrong with people who do not (p. 34).

For her, if the law is not helpful here, schools might well foster encounters that help develop the moral sensitivity of caring people.

## Teaching

It is clear in Noddings's philosophy of education that caring is basic to teaching. Here she is at length:

[We can] see that teaching involves a meeting of one-caring and cared-for. I can lecture to hundreds and this is neither inconsequential nor unimportant, but this is not teaching. To teach involves a giving of self and a receiving of other. I can receive ... just so many ... I must explain, question, doubt, explore, revise, discover, err, and correct, but I must also receive, reflect and act. Further, and especially, as one caring I have a special obligation to maintain and enhance the ethical ideal of the cared-for. To do this, I need to know what it is, and I need to share mine. We must together consider what is right-in-this-case. No constraint on the way teaching is can remove the constraint on me as one-caring (p. 113).

An example from *Caring* recalls her biography as a mathematics teacher, as one who loves mathematics. She relates,

I encounter a student who is doing poorly, and I decide to have a talk with him. He tells me that he hates mathematics ... What matters to me, if I care, is that he find some reason, acceptable in his inner self, for learning the mathematics required of him or that he reject boldly and honestly (p. 15).

Caring entails that the teacher sees as the student sees, apprehending his reality, acting “as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other” (p. 16). Together they struggle forward working to accomplish the other, the cared-for’s project.

It follows from this description of caring and teaching that it is also basic to schools. In schools, as in all places where people live, caring relations exist, or can exist, and must be maintained and enhanced. Noddings’s model for such schools – and for formal education itself – are best homes, in multiple forms. Turning to *Starting at Home* (2002), she explains,

The best homes provide not only food, shelter, clothing, and protection, but also attentive love; that is, at least one adult in the home listens to the needs expressed there and responds in a way that maintains caring relations ... Because ... [caring] is attentive it sets the stage for children to explore more or less freely, to learn things that they really want to learn, and to understand why they must become competent at least minimally in some things they would prefer to avoid (p. 284).

A special feature of the best homes is attending to children’s needs and herein care is both private and public. Referring to insights from feminist ethicist, Sara Ruddick about “preservation, growth and acceptability”, Noddings overviews basic physical and psychological needs but adds that they can be inferred and/or expressed. They may not be directly asserted by each one in need but can be identified by caring persons. Along with needs, importantly Noddings describes wants.

[All] of us need to have at least some of our non-basic wants met, and I would include this as a basic need (p. 66).

Ideal homes, she claims, have “near-perfect ways of negotiating these”. She continues,

Needs judged as basic are met unconditionally and are never deliberately withheld. Fervent wants are heard, interpreted, modified, approved contingently ... and satisfied. Inferred needs are articulated, accepted, assisted, and met. The process of identifying and satisfying basic needs is thus a highly complex process (p. 66).

Turning to schools, Noddings points out again and again that caring and meeting needs are certainly not top priority – if present at all. But schools can be places in which persons matter so much more

than standards and accountability. Concretely, she offers six suggestions for setting up such schools.

- 1) Establish this goal: “The main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving and lovable people” (Noddings 2005, p. 174).
- 2) Meet affiliative needs largely by keeping teachers and students together over longer periods of time than in typical schooling.
- 3) Relax control through giving both teachers and students more responsibility to exercise judgment – and reduce testing and get rid of competitive grading.
- 4) “Get rid of program hierarchies” by offering excellent programs for children with all sorts of interests and abilities.
- 5) Alter the school curriculum in part to include study of themes of care and focus on the practice of caring.
- 6) Teach children that caring implies competence both in school and beyond. As Noddings sums, “[there] is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong, resilient backbone of human life” (pp. 174–175).

## Philosophy

Noddings has contended that parts of her life needed to be drawn together in order to write as the philosopher of education that she desired to be. Her renown is testament to the success of this undertaking. In this essay, biographical and philosophical parts as they have contributed to a philosophy of education have been presented. At this point in, several aspects are clear from her writings. One is that education is of paramount importance. Another is that she demonstrates a unique philosophical perspective and style. Noddings names herself “a philosophical writer”, continuously intrigued by new ideas and projects. Across her texts, she has introduced and developed many especially useful ideas for educators as well as philosophers. Attention to thematic focus and within to concept development connects her to roots in graduate training in analytic philosophy. While affirming the work of this tradition, she positions herself differently:

Traditionally, philosophical methods have consisted of analysis and clarification of concepts, arguments, theories, and language ... [Today however] many philosophers engage in constructive work. They introduce new language and suggest powerful alternatives to the standard uses of language (Noddings 1995, p. 1).

Noddings primarily “constructs” and she often begins her own analyses from a kind of existential phenomenology. Referring to caring she explains,

[A] formal analysis of the Husserlian kind would not further my project. I am not interested in ultimate structures of consciousness; I seek a broad nearly universal description of ‘what we are like’ when we engage in caring encounters ... The attributes or characteristics I discuss are temporal, elusive, subject to distraction, and partly constituted by the behavior of the partners in caring (Noddings 2002, p. 13).

Several thematics of writing integral to this philosophical approach are developed across her texts. Two, feminism and life domains, serve as brief examples of philosophic emphases and point to significance at the close.

Before turning to the exemplars, one also finds a form of “textual pedagogy” within Noddings’s philosophical approach that deserves mention. Working from a real world context, experiences, and relevant texts, she describes teaching that mirrors and/or is mirrored by her writing. Initiated in *Caring* (1984), she posits a very broad form of moral education (education writ large) in which modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation are central. The pedagogy itself appears “phenomenological”. As illustration, she talks about a university teaching situation. In a class session, discussion centered on today’s capitalistic society, the issues of choice and happiness. That day she offered an Aristotelian stance toward moderation in personal consumption contrasted with Orwell’s proposal for a cap on earnings. Both, she says, are suggestions that students should hear and talk about.

I wouldn’t say ... ‘here’s the way it ought to be’ but I would say ‘here’s what important substantial thinkers have said about it. Now let’s talk about it.’ And then, if they pinned me down and said, ‘well, what do you think?’ I would tell them honestly where I stand and where I have some reservations about the ... situation we are ... considering.

Importantly this pedagogy is not a commitment to moral relativism. She continues,

Look ... [there] is one place where I would put an absolute ... For me, that would be the deliberate infliction of pain ... Are there people who deserve it? ... I don’t think so ... Sometimes we have to inflict pain because we have no other way to defend the people around that person. But the deliberate infliction of pain seems to be an absolute wrong.

Pain should not be inflicted in any circumstances, including importantly through educational processes and in schools.

## Thematics

Feminism is a first thematic serving as a lens on a second one, life domains. The subtitle of Noddings's first book on caring includes the phrase "a feminine approach", named to emphasize the traditional historic role of women as the major care givers in families, communities, and societies. She recounts a moment of recognition of this gender connection in a response to her work from educational theorist William Pinar. Today she identifies as a feminist with some interest in "socialist feminism" but, not surprisingly, she is unwilling to place any label on her position or her work.<sup>6</sup>

In *Starting at Home*, Noddings writes of the centrality of women's traditions. For centuries, she asserts, women have done most of the care-giving, an expectation found in historical documents, biography, and fiction. This expectation remains strong even as it has somewhat changed. Norms of caring today include public responsibility. She writes,

Yet, in countries where public care giving is much more generously supported than it is in the United States, complaints still arise about the lack of human caring – warmth, personal concern – in the care taking (Noddings 2002, p. 29).

Caring in public as in private, must be founded in and where possible modeled on relation. Intuitively women have known this personal caring within families and homelike groups; their experiences, their traditions, thus, should be studied both empirically and philosophically. For Noddings, specifically, feminism and women's traditions serve as a lens for writings about central private and public concerns that are located throughout her texts. With contributions from her feminism, as a second thematic, "life domains" as a philosophical emphasis is illustrated in views, presented herein all too briefly, on religion, and democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Religion is an issue "critical to the life of the individual and the collective" that Noddings writes about in a forthcoming book. The 1993 text, *Educating for Intelligent Belief and Unbelief*, was a first statement on spirituality and education, an interest that continues. In a key chapter on religion and its connection to self-knowledge, she talks of the relationship of religion to young people's lives today, especially the failure purposely and precisely to ask them about their feelings and thoughts. "Listen" in as she says this:



How many thousands of kids in this country ... live in fear of hell? ... Shouldn't they know that there are many good people, even some very religious people, who have rejected that concept entirely ... 'No, you don't have to worry about hell. Worry more about hurting your brother.' But we don't dare touch a question like that ... [in schools] ... [Most of] our high school kids don't have a clue ... [about writings on this topic] ... I wouldn't have them read ... [extensively from] Bertrand Russell and John Stuart Mill ... [but] I would have them read excerpts ... and listen to conversations about them. Because we're talking democracy ... [that is, exposure].

For Noddings the most salient feature about the place of religion in education is that it cannot be talked about in most schools, in most states in the US. Here she is again:

And still we want to say we're educated and that the fundamental notion of education ... is the development of the capacity to think clearly ... [about] all kinds of things ... That's a heartache ... [that we cannot discuss religious views] in public schools.

In the remarks quoted just above, Noddings mentions democracy, tied to exposure of ideas for children. Exposure might well be a contemporary term for Dewey's notion of democracy as characterizing group membership, depth in one's own affiliations of interest and extent of contact with other groups. As indicated above, Dewey is clearly influential to her thinking about democracy even as she emphasizes some differences from him. One is the form of interactions, another is the topic of encounter, and a third is use of "choice" terminology today.

Of the first, Noddings explains that Dewey understood the need for continuing contact – he called it first "interaction" – between people and their environments. Even as he moved to "transaction" late in life and always understood the fullness of such experiences, differences remain from her concept of the caring relation. Of the second, Noddings believes that Dewey was a bit conservative about curriculum, basing his discussions too heavily in the traditional disciplines. She says,

I don't think ... [Dewey] pays enough attention to the existential questions ... He's wrapped up in problem identification and problem solving and I think that ... [he] misses a lot of what we humans wonder about ... [He misses the importance of ... human relationships].

The third, the issue of choice, is an area of current thinking for Noddings; choice is fundamental to her social and political philosophy. She explains,

if you live in a liberal democracy and you want to sustain ... [it], then you've got to recognize that choice is fundamental ... I mean sometimes we call it 'freedom' or 'liberty', but choice is really ... [basic].

Such choice, importantly, must be exercised by children and adults and it must be informed. It also cannot be "prescribed". People might well choose to live under monarchy or even benevolent dictatorship. It is up to them, although democracy is her own preferred form of association.

## Significance

This essay has presented an interpretation of the life and work of Nel Noddings as it exemplifies a philosophy of education. Mentioned throughout, she has not written such a statement herself but one seems apparent. Concluding consideration of this "philosophy", points to a final concept in this interpretation of her writings; this is interest. Interest has just been related to democracy and to choice; it has even more broad presence in the parts constituting all lives – or it ought to have this primacy. In the caring relations of parenting and teaching, interests of children accompany basic needs and wants. Parents and teachers need to know the children in their care and know what is interesting to them. Each person has interests that need to be fostered. Likewise each needs exposure to new realms in order to develop new interests. Furthermore, interests bridge the home and school. For Noddings,

With rare exceptions ... [schools today] are not supportive places for students with any genuine or intrinsic interests (Noddings 2005, p. 60).

In *Challenge to Care*, she offers an "alternative curriculum" in which planning by teachers and students centers around interests and choices and around multiple student capacities and affiliations. Her six centers of caring are well-worth mentioning to close this essay: self, the inner circle of intimate others and associates, strangers and distant others, animals, plants and the earth, the human-made world, and ideas.

As a scholar, Noddings displays her own interests that surely are significant to all who have read her writings. In "drawing parts together" of her own life that indeed are personal interests, she has chosen

to focus on ethics and has developed a comprehensive contribution to care theory as a result. It has become of “interest” to a wide audience across many professions that includes but extends beyond professional education. One recognition is that an ethics of care is a remarkable alternative to traditional, principled Kantian ethics; members of the philosophic community have acknowledged Noddings’s contribution. As a philosopher, too, her approach exemplifies an alternative methodology; as a scholar in general and as a feminist writer, this opens possibility for diversifying the parent discipline and its education relative.

Always connected to education, today Nel Noddings sees herself primarily as a writer, with notes for future projects stacked and waiting on a bottom home-office shelf. She says, “a good part of my life revolves around thinking about what I am going to write next and actually doing it”. She spends almost no time focusing on past work nor on present reviews. She is not interested in a “concluding assessment” of the general importance of her work. This means that *we* whose lives are touched by her have much to continue to look forward to. In continuing to draw parts of her life together she aids us in our own quests, not the least through a philosophy of education.

#### Notes

1. This statement is paraphrased from *Happiness and Education*, p. 241.
2. This essay is based on analysis of major texts as well as interviews conducted on December 30 and 31, 2005 at Ocean Grove, New Jersey, USA. Thanks to Professor Noddings for this very special encounter. Also thanks to Jim Marshall for conversation and to Tomas Englund for the invitation to “bring parts of my own life together” in writing this article.
3. In the text, statements in quotations with no sources are taken from interview transcripts. Kathleen Rands did the transcriptions.
4. In *Caring*, Noddings formalizes the “she” and “he” relation because of the centuries’ long history of women as primary care-givers. This feminist aspect of her work is returned to in the next section.
5. Noddings is always careful to credit roots and inspiration for her own conceptions from other philosophers. Among them, mentioned as especially influential early are Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel; in addition later are Simone Weil and Gaston Bachelard.
6. Others have called her a “cultural” feminist because of her focus on the general societal contributions of women’s lives.
7. This term was coined during the interviews. Her forthcoming book focuses on such domains and issues of importance within them. Two other examples are parenting, written about in detail in *Starting at Home*, and advertising forthcoming.

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